

A new youth at every Biennial. Geert Bekaert and the *Interieur* Foundation

Certains esprits qui aiment le mystère veulent croire que les objets conservent quelque chose des yeux qui les regardèrent. Cette chimère deviendrait vraie s'ils la transposaient dans le domaine de la seule réalité pour chacun, dans le domaine de sa propre sensibilité.

– Marcel Proust

The not-for-profit *Interieur* Foundation was set up in Kortrijk, Belgium, in 1967. Its objective was – and is to this day – ‘the promotion of creativity in the field of contemporary design’; its most important initiative is the organisation of the *Interieur* Biennial – arguably the penultimate (recurring) event in the field of design and craft in Belgium during the past forty years. The history of this foundation is hard to trace, as it does not seem to have undergone any historical or even noteworthy changes. Its mission statement and its realizations (a competition, a fair, a voluminous catalogue) have not changed since the first Biennial in 1968. This apparent lack of history or evolution is striking, as both society and interior design seem to have changed quite a lot.

One important way of looking at this (non-)evolution, is by examining the oeuvre of Belgian architecture critic Geert Bekaert, who has written since the fifties numerous articles on architecture and art, but also on interior and furniture design. Bekaert, born in Kortrijk in 1928, was from the very beginning closely involved with the Foundation. He was a member of the advisory board in 1967, and contributed to several *Interieur* catalogues since 1968. He was a member of the international jury in 1984 and 1986, ‘honorary guest’ in 1988, and president of the Foundation from 1992 until 1998. This longstanding relationship between Bekaert and *Interieur* and its biennial, makes it possible to define firstly what the two-yearly exhibition is all about; secondly, what design and craft can mean in contemporary society; and thirdly, what a critic and theoretician like Bekaert finds attractive and illuminating in both phenomena.

Two texts by Bekaert suffice to enlighten these topics, especially when they are confronted and compared with other theoretical texts. The first text is entitled ‘Designed man’, and appears in 1968 as a sort of introduction to the first *Interieur*-catalogue (1). Bekaert is not entirely without reservations as it comes to this initiative. Places where modern design is presented – fairs or furniture shops – are everywhere in contemporary society, he argues, and why would *Interieur* be any different? On the one hand, it could offer a strict selection of so-called ‘good design’, and present to the general public a tendentious, educational or even patronizing perspective. On the other hand, it could trust in the ability of the public to decide and choose for itself – but necessarily leave the offer over to the uncompromising laws of the market. A straightforward – and in a way quite realistic and dialectic – solution for *Interieur* would be to simply *avoid* or merge these extremes. Consumerist mechanisms could be shut out (the initiative could be paid by government funding or sponsoring, so it should not really be profitable), and the selection could be made by a pluralist, international and very ‘open’ jury (that could ensure that only ‘quality’ would be bought). While in reality (or at least in a pessimistic version of reality) this is probably what *Interieur* ended up to be, Bekaert does not want to take those two possibilities into consideration – or rather: he thinks that the *Interieur* Biennial should not evolve around that dichotomy. It should simply try to be much more than an unworldly

reservation or a rigorous and helpful course. 'When an initiative like that in Kortrijk', he writes, 'wants to have any meaning whatsoever, this meaning can only exist in the rejection of this superseded dilemma, to honestly look for the concrete relationships between man and interior in our age.' The *Interieur* Biennial in particular, design and craft in general, have nothing to do with swimming between the poles of money making or *schöner wohnen*; between cynical profit or segregated counselling – according to Bekaert, it has to do with the individual who can decide for himself, and who is critically looking for ways to develop and define his own personality. This means that the design critic (or the critic in general) is there, not primarily to show the good examples that are worthy of imitation, not to fight the mechanism of the market that will strangle all qualities – but the critic mostly ensures the *existence of criticality* and autonomy – of himself, but mostly of the general public. The critic keeps guard over the universal and concrete existence of criticism. That is why, in his text from 1968, Bekaert attacks, in the last paragraphs and entirely in accordance to the non-functionalist spirit of the age, the dogma's and the ideals of modernist design. 'These designers,' he says, 'have thought they could sail around these questions [of modern man] by breaking up the object from the concrete human being, by isolating it as something independent, something that exists in itself and that finds its justification in the response to an abstract ideal. This ideal was formulated on the base of a so-called functionality, in which man could only exist as a kind of automaton.'

The *Interieur* Biennial of Kortrijk, to summarize what Bekaert wrote in 1968, could be a place, every two years, where the thing, the object, can be itself – which means that it can be regarded, observed, pondered and questioned by the concrete human being, in all democratic freedom. This is certainly not evident, if it is not outright utopian. According to the last sentence of the text, Bekaert seems to understand this: 'Designers', he writes, 'can create for man the conditions and stimulants that enable him to indulge in his originality and creativity – if these at least might exist.' *If these at least might exist*: we can not be sure if the 'concrete human being' is there, if originality and creativity might exist, or if the general public can cope with the absence of patronizing mechanisms and the presence of the freedom of the market. But we – or certainly the design critic and the organisation behind a mass event like *Interieur* – need to believe in that possibility.

That it is no longer simple or obvious to engage with the objects surrounding us, to relate with them in an individual, intelligent and conscious way, is of course somewhat of a cliché in western theoretical thought. An object or a thing that is 'handed over' to the general public – be it by the mass market or by governmental or divisional interference – cannot be used by this public in an authentic way. It will not enrich life by a daily use, but just narrow it down to a neurotic and automatized way of killing time, to a bourgeois and formal means of pretending to be happy or successful.

Two famous and related examples of this 'theory of loss' and of this difficulty of engaging with objects, are delivered by Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin. In his text 'Das Thing', 'The thing', Heidegger states that modern man has not yet learned to let things be *things*: he has not truly respected and understood, in a deep and existential way, what things are and how we see them (2). Modern man does no longer *think* about things, but just uses them for his own, often unconscious, profit, in a scientific or economical way. In the age of mass transportation and telecommunication in which distances no longer exist, Heidegger argues, the really important and crucial distance has up to now been neglected by modernity: it is the

distance that exists between ourselves and the objects that surround us. It is the nearness – or the difficulty of experiencing nearness – that should be at stake in our relationships with objects.

The notion of nearness is also used in another famous example of the theory of alienation of modern man towards the objects surrounding him – the theory of the aura as described by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin has written about the aura as an experience of ‘distance as close as it can be’ (most famously in his *Photography*-essay); objects with an aura remain at a distance but obtain nearness, by seemingly coming closer to the person who looks at them. Just as Heidegger, Benjamin emphasises the loss of aura, or at least the problematic and endangered existence of the aura in modern times. The invention and the general distribution of technological innovations such as photography, sound recordings or wireless communication are without a doubt, writes Benjamin in his *Baudelaire*-essay, ‘the essential achievements of a society, in which the exercising contact with things falls into disrepair.’ (3) Or to put it differently: in which the existence of aura becomes more and more unlikely. Both Heidegger and Benjamin have hinted at a contemporary search for ‘nearness’ or ‘aura’; neither of them has put aside the hope of still achieving a form of ‘contact’ with objects that is not entirely functional, abstract or mechanized, but that, on the contrary, gives man the feeling that he is alive, that he is part of a larger whole that keeps on escaping him. ‘Experience of the aura,’ writes Benjamin, ‘rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at it means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.’ In an important footnote, Benjamin has added a second layer to this exchange of man with the objects surrounding him: ‘This endowment’, he writes, ‘is a wellspring of poetry.’ When poetry means dealing with language in a non-functionalist, quite useless but enriching way; the aura (as defined by Benjamin) or the nearness (as defined by Heidegger) of objects is a non-linguistic, materialist form of poetry. This means that the auratic experience of objects, is one of the many ways in which modern man can transcend himself, can achieve a positive existential experience, can look at life in a non-comprehending, mysterious but satisfying way.

It is this kind of experience that Bekaert has constantly hoped for when it comes to the *Interieur* Biennial in Kortrijk. This is expressed clearly in the second text written by him that is useful in this context: the introduction to the catalogue of the Biennial of 1992 (Bekaert was chairman at the time) – an especially festive Biennial, as it marked the twenty-fifth birthday of the *Interieur* Foundation. Bekaert uses this occasion to reflect on the notions of youth and age: the *Interieur* Foundation might be 25 years old, but it remains as young as ever: ‘There is a game in which participants have to determine someone’s real age, not coinciding with his biological age. There are indeed people who are born old and people who never grow old. The real age of a woman or a man of seventy may be twelve or thirty or ninety. If we had to guess the real age of *Interieur*, our answer would be twenty-five. *Interieur* has always been twenty-five and, hopefully, will remain twenty-five for a very long time.’ (4) The reason for this everlasting youth of *Interieur* is that it deals with ‘design’ – ‘design’ can, in the theory of Bekaert and in the context of *Interieur* and of the Biennial – be considered as the human activity that keeps existence young. This is, of course, a similar way of describing what Benjamin meant when he spoke about the preservation of the aura, or what Heidegger meant when he thought about the

‘thingness’ and the ‘nearness’ of objects. ‘Design,’ Bekaert writes, ‘doesn’t resign itself to the existing. It always seeks more; it always seeks to go further. It seeks, again and again, to withdraw the existing from the rut in which it threatens to sink and to grant it a new youth. It seeks to protect life, to protect it against every form of partiality and rigidity by reshaping it over and over again.’

Design is what makes things ‘thing’, as Heidegger put it comically; it is what returns the aura to objects that seemed to have lost it forever, as Benjamin would have called it; and it is a way of keeping life young, of thinking of life as a state of constantly becoming 25 years old, as Bekaert wrote it on the occasion of the *Interieur* Biennial in 1992.

The possibility of this form of magic, of the emergence of ‘thinging’ things and auratic objects that, against all odds, renew and even reinforce life by their sheer presence, depends indeed on the special character of the *Interieur* Biennial, that served as the point of departure for Bekaert’s first text from 1968. To resume:

Interieur does not impose things on the visitors of the Biennial; coming close to the experience as it is described above, cannot be simply called down or imposed on the public – it has to *search* for it, amid an endless variety of possible candidates, together with as many other human beings as possible. ‘This search’, writes Bekaert in 1968, ‘does not come up here [in Kortrijk] for the first time ever. But then again, it is posed in a very concrete and complete situation, and that has not happened that much before. All parties concerned, from producer to consumer, are present here. The appointed problem touches on everyone that is, no matter how slightly, concerned with interior design, and that holds true for the entire human civilisation, public and private, that needs an interior for its own survival.’

In this sense, this conception of the *Interieur* Biennial can very well be compared with the notion of the festival, as it was defined by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his essay on *The relevance of the beautiful* (5). According to Gadamer, the festivity is characteristic for its wide scope and its general public; and for its autonomous and recurrent time regime. Firstly, a festival is an ‘experience of community and represents community in its most perfect form.’ Everybody needs chairs, everybody needs glasses to drink from: the inclusive character of design (that is, as one could argue, even more inclusive than architecture), makes an *Interieur* Biennial – ideally and in theory – a place and an event – a party for everyone. But secondly, by its very nature, a Biennial takes up a specific amount of time: in the case of the first Biennial: from 19th until 27th October in 1968. This position on the calendar corresponds with the duration of a daily visit, during which all other worldly activities cease to exist, in order to regard – ‘behold’ as Heidegger would put – the gathered objects, together with everybody else. It is this double condition – conceptually and temporary –, together with the proper disregard of the dichotomy between the liberal market and the old-fashioned patronizing, that turns the *Interieur* exhibition, every two years, into the penultimate place for the experience of design. It is the task of the design critic, as Bekaert came to show, to partake in this event, to give an account of his own experience, to critically and independently make a temporary selection – just like everybody else does. More specifically, however, and more fundamentally, the critic has to guard the continued existence of the Biennial and of design in the ongoing history of mankind.

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- (1) Geert Bekaert, 'De designte mens', in: AAVV, *Interieur 68. Tentoonstellingscatalogus*, vzw Interieur, Kortrijk, 1968, s.p. Republished in: Geert Bekaert, *Los in de ruimte. Verzamelde opstellen deel 2. 1966-1970*, Stichting Monumenten- en Landschapszorg, 1986, pp.267-269.
- (2) Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing', in: Idem, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper Collins, 2001.
- (3) Walter Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', in: Idem, *Illuminations*, Pimlico Press, 1999, pp.152-196.
- (4) Geert Bekaert, 'Preface', in: AAVV, *Interieur 92. Tentoonstellingscatalogus*, vzw Interieur, Kortrijk, 1992, p.6.
- (5) Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Die Aktualität des Schönen*, Reclam, 2006.